



# West Valley VIEW

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## **EMCC cross country growing in 1st year** *Team to race in last meet today*

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Estrella Mountain Community College's cross country teams finished last in almost every meet in which they competed this season, but you wouldn't know it from listening to head coach Carl Tichenor talk about them.

The program is in its infancy, as EMCC has sports teams for the first time in the school's history - golf is the other one but doesn't start until spring. Being so young, the results haven't been there, but improvement has.

"Out of our runners there's been 42 races total among the athletes in five meets, and in 38 of those races they've recorded personal best performances, so that's pretty significant," Tichenor said. "The average years of experience on the team is a little over one, but certainly less than two. To be able to have them plug into a training program and produce those kinds of results is very encouraging, so things are setting up really nice for next year."

This season is not over yet, though. EMCC has one meet remaining, the National Junior College Athletic Association's Region I meet, at 10 a.m. today at Riverview Park in Mesa.

There are only nine athletes on the team, seven boys and two girls, in large part because of how late Tichenor got the job. Since EMCC had to go through a long process in order to be granted athletic programs, there wasn't even a coach in place until May. Meanwhile, most athletes commit to schools starting in December of the previous year, Tichenor said.

"We got started really late, and most of the top performers at the high school level, regardless of where they were in the Valley, they had already made their commitments," Tichenor said. "It was a little tough, but what we did, through the help of the administration, was broadcast the message to the student body. I was very fortunate to get some guys and ladies on the team with experience, and we've rolled with it ever since."

Considering Tichenor did not have the advantage of recruiting high school athletes like most coaches get to, he thinks the program has done OK, he said.

"I am disappointed we were not able to [field a full team] for the women, but efforts are being made right now to contact various high school coaches and hopefully add on to the program we're building here," Tichenor said.

### **Boys team**

Of the seven boys EMCC has, David Rodrigo, a Tolleson graduate, has been the team's top runner. Rodrigo was mostly a wrestler in high school, but he did run one year of cross country.

"He's done very well, and at the Region I meet he has a shot at breaking the top 20, and that's a significant achievement for a first-year program and a guy that only had one year of cross country experience in high school," Tichenor said. "He's responded really well."

If Rodrigo can somehow get into the top 15 at the Region I meet, he'd qualify for the national championships.

"He's on the fringe, is going to have to have the race of his life to put himself in that position," Tichenor said. "Could he do it? If he has the best race of his life, yeah he could, but the competition, we're arguably in the toughest cross country region in the National Junior College Athletic Association. Over the last 10, 11 years, five men's teams and five women's teams out of this region have won the national championship."

Brad Rowley, Juan Olvera and Eli Nieto are the Nos. 2, 3 and 4 runners. Those three, along with Rodrigo, have proclaimed themselves the Wolf Pack, even though the school's mascot is a mountain lion.

"It became clear in the first several weeks of training that David, Brad, Eli and Juan could run together as a group, as a pack," Tichenor said. "They are really the ones that have separated themselves, and there's no question a coach can build a program around four guys like that. They definitely have to drop their times, but I think they've learned a lot and if those four guys come back we're going to have a really strong foundation."

The No. 5 runner is Charlie Fridrich, a Millennium graduate. He played baseball and football in high school but wanted to participate in cross country at EMCC because of his competitive nature.

"This guy finished dead last in the NAU Invitational, but since that time in the meets that have come after, he's dropped his time almost 10 minutes," Tichenor said. "Needless to say, he's not finishing last anymore. He's my fifth guy, and more than anything he exemplifies the spirit and hard work ethic the whole team has shown, and I can't say enough about him and everybody else."

### **Girls team**

While the girls team only has two members, those athletes have been incredibly dedicated despite not being able to score points as a team, Tichenor said. Alyssa Fell is the top runner, while Jessica Stewart is not far behind.

"Jess is definitely chasing Alyssa, but it's a great objective to have in any race, knowing you've got a teammate there you're striving to reach," Tichenor said. "I think that's helped Jess more than anything. Alyssa brought in more talent, but Jess has fed off of it, and I think that has been a big factor in Jess's ability to get a personal best every time she runs."

Training has been critically important to the team's improvement throughout the season, Fell said. Tichenor has broken up their regimen into three phases, and it seems to have worked.

"The first phase we did all distance to get us used to the endurance of it, then he split it into intervals to practice our consistency and pace, and right now we're doing phase three, which is all speed and fine tuning," Fell said. "After each phase we get better and better because we're putting it all together, and it shows in our races."

Fell's fastest time in competition is 22 minutes, 44 seconds. The girls run on 3.1-mile courses.

"I think, without question, they threw themselves into a very rigorous training program, and I think it will bode well for them next year when they know what to expect coming in," Tichenor said.

Despite the individual improvement, it didn't turn into strong team results for EMCC. However, that's not what Tichenor was worried about given all the circumstances entering this season.

"I think we beat one team all year, but somebody asked me, how do you measure success, and it's easy, especially when you're building a program and you're looking at a sport like long-distance running, you don't measure it in wins and losses, you measure it in how you help these young people improve upon their prior performances," Tichenor said.

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